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ART. X. — CRITICAL NOTICES.

1. — *The First Ten Cantos of the Inferno of Dante Alighieri; newly translated into English Verse.* Boston: William D. Ticknor. 1843. 8vo. pp. 83.

WE have read these cantos of the new translation of Dante with interest and care. It is executed with considerable skill and metrical power. The undertaking is a daring one, and calls for immense study, unwearied labor, great command of language, and no small share of poetical endowment, to accomplish it successfully. From the nature of the poem, the endless variety of allusion interwoven in it, and the distant period of its composition, large portions must remain for ever obscure, except to those who have given more labor to the examination of the history of Italy during the Middle Ages, than men are commonly willing to spend on an object so remote from the pursuits of the present day. The extraordinary compression of Dante's language is somewhat repulsive to the lovers of light reading and cheap literature. The condensed language of this old poet, under which the great central fires of the intensest soul that was ever imprisoned in the human breast seem raging and ever ready to burst forth, presents startling difficulties to effeminate sciolists. To represent these cardinal qualities adequately in another language is a task of all but insuperable difficulty. The English language is capable of great condensation; but the tendency of the later literature has been somewhat like that of the currency in commercial countries — to expansion, — and he who would bring his style to the requisite brevity for a good translation of Dante must give his days and nights to the study of the old English authors, and to the reduction of all superfluous phraseology. To translate Dante is no child's play. The best powers, acting in the best moments, and applied again and again to the task, can do no more than approximate the energy, the fire, and the impressive melody of the great Florentine.

Mr. Parsons has evidently studied his author with conscientious industry, and mastered his meaning, before attempting to convey it into English. His selection of the measure of Gray's "Elegy," though it is one of the most impressive metres in our language, is perhaps a questionable deviation from the original. Mr. Parsons's versification is generally easy, fluent, and expressive, but in too many passages, his translation departs from the expression, if not the sense, of the Italian. He shows a ready perception of the poetical in style, and a good judgment in the choice of poetical words. We shall best illustrate the merits of this translation, by

giving a short passage with the original, and with the corresponding passage in Cary's version. We take a few lines, without special selection, from the ninth Canto.

"Come le rane innanzi alla nimica
 Biscia per l'acqua si dileguan tutte
 Finch' alla terra ciascuna s'abbica ;
 Vid' io piu di mille anime distrutte
 Fuggir cosi dinanzi ad un ch' al passo
 Passava Stige colle piante asciutte.
 Dal volto rimovea quell' aer grasso
 Menando la sinistra innanzi spesso,
 E Sol di quell' angoscia pareva lasso.
 Ben m' accorsi ch' egli era del ciel messo,
 E volsimi al maestro ; e quei fe' segno
 Ch' io stessi cheto ed inchinassi ad esso.
 Ahi quanto mi pareva pien di disdegno !"

PARSONS.

"As frogs before their enemy, the snake,
 Quick scattering through the pool in timid shoals,
 On the dank ooze a huddling cluster make,
 I saw above a thousand ruined souls
 Flying from one who passed the Stygian bog,
 With feet unmoistened by the sludgy wave ;
 Oft from his face his left hand brushed the fog,
 Whose weight alone, it seemed, annoyance gave,
 At once the messenger of heaven I kenned,
 And toward my master turned, who made a sign
 That hushed I should remain and lowly bend ;
 Ah me ! how full he looked of scorn divine !"

CARY.

"As frogs
 Before their foe the serpent, through the wave
 Fly swiftly all, till at the ground each one
 Lies on a heap ; more than a thousand spirits
 Destroyed, so saw I fleeing before one
 Who passed with unwet feet the Stygian sound,
 He from his face removing the gross air,
 Oft his left hand forth stretched, and seemed alone
 By that annoyance wearied. I perceived
 That he was sent from heaven ; and to my guide
 Turned me, who signal made, that I should stand
 Quiet and bend to him. Ah me, how full
 Of noble anger seemed he."

We believe every reader will agree with us in claiming the superiority, in poetical merit, for our countryman.

From the preceding observations it will be seen, that we are of opinion, that further study and repeated trials will enable Mr. Parsons to bring his version much nearer to Dante. We observe, that he is sometimes driven, by what he appropriately calls

"stress of rhyme," to insert epithets and clauses not found in the original. This process is allowable, when the additional words only carry out the implied sense of what is actually expressed. For instance, in the above quoted passage, the epithet *divine*, applied to *scorn* in the last line, has no corresponding Italian epithet. Translated literally, and taking in every word, the line runs,

"Ah ! how to me appeared he full of wrath."

The *divine* is only an implication from the circumstances of the case. But even in these cases, it is better to avoid such interpolations. They invariably weaken or falsify the original ; and the latter effect is produced, even when the addition is an improvement ; and one translation is better than another, *ceteris paribus*, in proportion as it avoids these alterations and additions. Let us look at one passage more, to which this process has been applied.

"He turned me round from their vindictive ire,
And with his *shadowy* fingers veiled my gaze!"

It is the Spirit of Virgil saving Dante from the Gorgon's petrifying look, and the epithet *shadowy* applied to his fingers, though a fine and appropriate one, is neither Dante's nor Dantesque. Cary in this case is truer, though not so spirited.

"Himself, my gentle master, turned me round ;
Nor trusted he my hands, but with his own
He also hid me."

We regard the translation of a great poet as a work of high art. It is not enough to render his meaning from one language to another, and to make a readable book without reference to the original. The *form* is quite essential, and should, if possible, be preserved ; otherwise, we do not have what the translator professes to give us. The poet has his reasons for choosing one form rather than another ; such is the shape in which he deliberately determines that his creations shall be presented to the world ; and none but the gravest arguments can justify the translator for setting aside the poet's own decision. The rhythm in Dante is inexpressibly affecting ; the *terza rima* moulds his thoughts into such a form, that they have a force and meaning altogether peculiar and indescribable ; and quite different from any effect that can be produced by the measure of Gray's "Elegy," noble and solemn as that quatrain is. We do not agree with Mr. Parsons, that "this is the nearest approach to the lengthened harmony of the Italian *terza rima* which is recognised by English ears." On the contrary, Byron's "Prophecy of Dante," which he considered "as a metrical experiment," is a magnifi-

cent illustration of the power of this rhythm in English, and shows conclusively that, in able hands, its long-drawn music may to a great extent be reproduced.

The notes are learned and judicious, and the concluding "Word with the Reader" contains a good deal of sound criticism, pithily and elegantly expressed. Some of the author's statements, however, are not in perfect taste; and his remarks about "the petty care taken by many translators to tie themselves to the precise number of lines found in their original" are almost flippant. We assure Mr. Parsons, that the best translations which have ever been made into the English language are nearly word for word, line for line, epithet for epithet, and rhythm for rhythm, after the originals; and that there are translations executed upon this principle, which are not more distinguished for their masterly reproduction of the very spirit of the pieces, undiluted and unaltered, than for their exquisite melody and their correct and idiomatic expression, considered merely as English poems. We are not much pleased either with the intimation, that "a profound Schlegel" has "ignorantly praised" Shakspeare. His praise of Shakspeare may not agree exactly with our own or Mr. Parsons's; but Schlegel never spoke or wrote ignorantly on any subject; least of all on Shakspeare. His criticisms are the delight of those who have studied Shakspeare most, and who love him best.

2. — *The Huguenots in France and America.* By the Author of the "Three Experiments of Living," &c. Cambridge: John Owen. 1843. 2 vols. 16mo.

THESE two interesting volumes go over a strange and striking period in the history of Europe. The persecutions and struggles of the French Protestants, from the time of Francis the First, until their rights were completely established by the accession of Louis Philippe, are well related. Extending over so long a period, many things of great importance must be wholly omitted, others barely touched upon, and others but briefly stated. In the early part of the work, many characters are introduced for a moment and then disappear; numerous events, whose connexion can only be understood by one who has already acquired an extended knowledge of previous history, and the history of the times, are only alluded to. The complicated relations of parties are hinted at, without being explained. But the limits of the work, and the comprehensive nature of the subject, made it impossible to give it a different form. The early history of the